

## Aspects of tragedy: Exemplar student response (AS Paper 1A, Section A)

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Below you will find an exemplar student response to a Section A question in the specimen assessment materials for AS Paper 1A.

### Paper 1A, Section A, Band 3

#### Sample question

Explore the significance of the aspects of dramatic tragedy in the following passage in relation to the play as a whole.

You should consider the following in your answer:

- the presentation of Iago and Othello
- the dramatic setting
- other relevant aspects of dramatic tragedy.

#### Sample response

The extract has been taken from Act One Scene Two of William Shakespeare's tragic play Othello. In the scene previously the audience has witnessed Othello, a black military general, marry the upper class daughter of Brabantio, Desdemona. Othello and the antagonist of the play, Iago, are outside the sagittary in this extract and Iago is doing his usual bidding of trying to tease Othello's hubris; excessive pride. The two are interrupted by Cassio who arrives with news of Cyprus. Soon, Othello will have to leave his new wedded wife and travel to Cyprus for the protection of Venice.

The extract opens with the entrance of Othello, Iago and also some attendants. Immediately the audience can see a close bond between Iago and Othello as they 'enter' together. Later this friendship will be exploited by Iago to create Othello's tragic downfall. Shakespeare may have furthermore used the torches as a device to connote this imagery of light and goodness around Othello as a character. Othello contrasts in his brightness to Iago at the beginning of the play. Iago is the first to speak in the extract and Shakespeare describes him as doing so in prose. As the extract is taken from so early on in the play, we could assume that Shakespeare does so to reinforce the concept that Iago is a lower class character and therefore does not tend to speak in blank verse. Iago's first speech in this extract is one of violence. He seems shocked that Othello did not attack Brabantio after his demeaning discussion with him regarding the marriage of his

daughter. Iago is putting up a false pretence of care and compassion for Othello as the audience will gather by the end of the play. Othello however, subverts Elizabethan expectations as he replies calmly that it is 'better as it is', meaning it is better that he did not act violently upon Brabantio. This calm, educated response may have surprised a conventionally racist audience who may have expected Othello, as a black man, to have been violent in his speech.

Further along in the extract Iago continues to keep up this false air of care for Othello. In retrospect it is clear to the audience that Iago has to build up this trust inside their friendship so he can later exploit it. The overall tragedy of the play is only highlighted by how Iago destructs this relationship. Further attempts for Othello to react in a physical act upon Brabantio are created as Iago manipulates Othello into having hatred for his father-in-law, Brabantio. Iago describes Brabantio as speaking such 'scurvy' and 'provoking' terms. Overall Iago can be seen here in this extract as trying to encourage Othello to attack Brabantio before he 'divorces' Othello and puts upon him 'restraint' and 'grievance'.

Othello however responds yet again calmly to Iago, telling him to let Brabantio 'do his spite'. Throughout this next part of the extract Othello's language will be sprinkled with lines of blank verse, reinforcing the idea that he is polite and educated. Further evidence that the extract is taken from an early stage in the play is given when Othello describes Desdemona as 'gentle'. Later in the play, the audience will see Othello's opinion of Desdemona completely ruined by the constant influence of Iago. Shakespeare also promotes the idea that the balance of power between these two characters is still intact as although Iago is the first to speak in the extract, Othello is the last. Moreover, their speech in this scene is relatively equal; later on in the play Iago's comments shall become much shorter as he begins to control Othello's position and exploit it.

Prior to the entrance of Cassio, Iago swears by a god called 'Janus'. This is significant as Shakespeare is giving another clear hint to the audience that Iago is not a character to be trusted. Janus was a two-headed god and the fact that Shakespeare adds in this detail suggests that from early on in the play he wants his audience to be aware that Iago is the antagonist of the play. This idea is only highlighted by the fact that Iago's first words of the play are 's'blood' which is particularly brutal and almost Machiavellian in nature.

The extract is significant to the tragedy of the play as a whole due to the fact that from very early on in the play, Shakespeare creates a clear bond between Iago and Othello. Iago's duplicity is only seen in retrospect by Othello, which makes the tragedy all the more dramatic. The tragedy is heightened as Shakespeare clearly gives small hints, such as Iago swearing by Janus, to suggest that he is not a trustworthy character. However, Othello is completely blind and believes him to be genuine. The extract also sets up the scene of the location change from Venice to Cyprus. Shakespeare uses this location of Cyprus as a dramatic device of sorts; the Elizabethan audience would expect order to only become more disorderly in Cyprus; a foreign place, supposedly uncivilised,

unlike Venice. The extract furthermore demonstrates how Iago eventually managed to manipulate Othello into the murdering of his wife. It is in scenes such as these that Iago is seen to slowly be working his way into exploiting Othello's worries and insecurities as a 'Moor' in Venice at this time.

## Examiner commentary

This student focuses on the task and offers a straightforward response to the passage making some relevant connections to the wider play. However, her knowledge and understanding are not very secure and there are a number of errors in the response. The student has some understanding of the tragic genre, though, and key aspects are selected in line with the question. There is also some relevant contextual material and an awareness of Shakespeare's dramatic method, though more could have been done with this.

The student begins by contextualising the passage and makes an attempt to establish an overview though this is not very precise. Some credit can be given but the comments are not entirely accurate, for example the audience has not just 'witnessed' the marriage of Othello and Desdemona, but 'heard' of their elopement through the hostile and unsympathetic voices of Iago, Brabantio and Roderigo. The student gives no sense that this is Othello's first appearance in the play or that this is the first time Iago interacts with him. Instead she writes that Iago is behaving in a 'usual' way, teasing out Othello's pride, almost as if they have been on stage many times together already.

In the second paragraph the student works at significance and comments on the 'close bond' between Iago and Othello. Again some credit is given for this even though the relationship between protagonist and antagonist is much more complex than the student suggests. At this point the student seems to be going through the passage picking out random details to comment on rather than focusing sharply on 'aspects of tragedy' and the bullets in an organised way. After the discussion of Othello and Iago's 'friendship', the student then writes about the torch and how it might suggest Othello's goodness. Perhaps it might have been more fruitful to write about Shakespeare's use of darkness here in relation to Iago's deception and the play's setting. The student then discusses Shakespeare's use of prose for Iago, which is inaccurate, and it is clear from what is written that the student does not really know what prose and verse are. It seems that the student has a number of thoughts about the play that she wants to get in and that regardless of the passage those points will be made. Thus a comment is made about social class and how prose reflects Iago's lower status. When the student moves on to specifically write about Iago's first speech there is again some inaccuracy with the student seeming to think that Othello has already been in a confrontational situation with Brabantio and has not attacked him. Although there is some ambiguity about who Iago is referring to when he says 'he prated and spoke such scurvy and provoking terms' (it could be Brabantio but perhaps more likely Roderigo), it is clear that the addressee was Iago and not Othello.

However, the student is accurate in saying that Iago is 'putting up a false pretence of care and compassion for Othello' and this is relevant for the first bullet. In this part of the discussion, there is an attempt to comment on the Elizabethan context and Shakespeare's subverting Elizabethan expectations. While some credit can be given here, the comments are not altogether convincing and more could have been done with the expectations of tragic drama rather than what Elizabethans might have thought about 'Othello as a black man'.

The comments at the start of the third paragraph are sharper and there is some sense here of the overall dramatic and tragic pattern and of Iago's role. The student shows good understanding of the relationship between the two.

In the fourth paragraph further comments are made about the relationship although there is again confusion about blank verse and about the power balance indicated by who speaks and how much is said. However, a relevant point is made about how Othello refers to Desdemona in the passage and how his opinion changes as a result of Iago's poison later in the play. There is also some relevant discussion of language and Iago's swearing by Janus. Links with other parts of the play are valid as is the mention of Iago's Machiavellian nature.

In the final paragraph the student's writing is quite crisp and although there is some repetition of ideas already mentioned, some points are developed – like Othello's tragic blindness. The discussion of Venice and Cyprus is not clearly linked to the extract though some credit can be given for this, particularly in relation to Iago and his slow manipulation of Othello.

Overall this is an inconsistent response and a best fit mark would be appropriate. It could just edge into Band 3.